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## We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Kenya

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**Book Review:**  
**We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Kenya**

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*We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Kenya.*  
Karen Weitzberg, (2017). 272 pages. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, \$32.95,  
ISBN 9780821422595.

*Karen Weitzberg opens her book with a proverb from the early Somali independence era: “wherever the camel goes, that is Somalia.” This quote sets the precedence for the book illustrating Somalis’ rocky relationship with borders. Originally, Somalis were nomadic pastoralists that frequently moved around, crossing borders. However, after many African countries gained independence, new border lines were drawn up. As a result of this new reality, many Somali clans were forced to claim their territorial land and were also shut out from other regions, thereby impacting their way of life. Weitzberg, a Stanford graduate with a background in African and Islamic studies, aims to focus on difficulties faced by minority groups and the way many indigenous people are easily rendered stateless.*

In this book Karen Weitzberg focuses on the life and struggles of the peoples of the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya where she highlights how life along the Kenyan border for many Somalis has become difficult. The book attempts to explain how the past years have shaped the perception of Somalis, particularly those that reside within the Kenya’s borders. Over the centuries, Somali and Oromo peoples had established a link that was social, linguistic and culturally similar to other cities across the Indian Ocean. Weitzberg backs this claim by using the writings of Burton, F (1987, *First Footsteps in East Africa*) who, in 1854 embarked on an ill-advised journey to Harar in Ethiopia. Arising from his sojourn, Burton described Somalis as ‘half castes in East Africa’ due to their societies being Islamized. In a way this is where the outsider stereotype of Somalis started, where they were viewed as not quite Arab and not quite African.

Weitzberg notes that Somalis within the region viewed themselves as nomads, who moved from one region to another searching for greener pastures. To them, there was no clear distinction of borders and they believed that all regions were accessible; a point that was later proven moot, once Kenya claimed the NFD region. Weitzberg states that by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ogaden and Dogadia clans had begun to establish themselves in the NFD region, thus creating their new identity as Kenyan-Somalis. Once African countries began to gain independence and Pan Africanism gained traction, it was no longer beneficial for Somalis to claim to be non-natives within the region. However, questions about Somalis’ origin and where they were native to became a divisive topic in the coming years.

Interviews were conducted by Weitzberg in order to generate data. She spoke to Kenyans from towns such as Nakuru, Naivasha, Isiolo and Garissa, as well as others from Mandera, Moyale and Marsabit. Alongside this, her key focus for her interviews was largely based on the nation’s capital Nairobi, and Wajir, one of the three counties in the former NFD. This approach allows her to draw parallels and see how different geographical locations define what it means to be Somali. Despite

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her best efforts, Weitzberg notes that the interviews conducted were mainly of men. This creates a bias and majorly, shuts out an entire gender's point of view. Essentially, the book does not illustrate the life of Somali women and how they are perceived. The lack of female interviewees was rectified through the use of oral and written testimonies from the British National Archives. This methodological approach can usually lead to a bias in information, therefore it is important to have a wide array of diverse narrative, a fact that Weitzberg herself had noted.

Despite not being able to conduct interviews with female participants, Weitzberg takes note of the historical presences Somali women had in the community during and after the Shifta War. In her book she cites a poem penned by a woman that had lived through the Shifta war. In one of her poems she talks about the people who are stuck in the middle of the war, crying out for the government and separatist forces to stop fighting. Weitzberg claims that this piece of poetry offers up a new perspective of Somali women that isn't enshrouded in victimhood. Importantly, the poem also highlights a key point that the Shifta war created internal conflict among the Somalis in the region. Many Somali pastoralists were raided by Somali fighters in order to fund their missions, resulting in distrust; although in later years' former fighters would deny these claims.

Yet another aim of the book is to highlight Somali history in Kenya and illustrate how far the community has come in their quest to achieve a sense of belonging. It provides an outsider's view to the dynamics of the Somali people within a rural and urban setting. The majority of the book is based off of data collected from Nairobi and Wajir residents. Many of those interviewed did so with the hope that the book would serve as a mouthpiece that would draw attention to the discrimination faced by Somalis in Kenya. Weitzberg adheres to the words of Eve Trout Powell (*A Different Shade of Colonialism*, 2003) and is cautious and works to ensure that she is attentive to past colonial sentiments where Somalis looked down on Kenyans and Kenyans have always viewed Somalis as foreigners.

The book tries to help people understand the feeling of displacement certain Somali communities face; Weitzberg uses the Isaaq community as an example of this. The Isaaq came to Kenya as "companions" of Lord Delamere under the British colonial rule, who, once establishing himself in Naivasha, gifted the community with land in Naivasha, which was reclaimed by the Kenyatta regime in 1972. Several Isaaq leaders consider that land to be their ancestral land but were run out of it by the same British who accused them of supporting the Mau Mau community. It is important for tribes in the country to have claimed a territorial homeland, since it provides them with a political constituency and definitive anchor within the country. Weitzberg cites Isaaq leader Fatuma Ayub (*Isahakia Ordered to Allow Survey of Naivasha Plot*, 2011), who claims that her community is Kenya's first Internally Displaced People (IDPs). However, this is contestable considering that all the major tribes went to war against the colonialists to regain their ancestral lands of which they were dispossessed.

The author's emphasis that the Somali community's biggest fear is to be dispossessed further of what is left of their ancestral lands and therefore losing their native identity, and the attendant biases it comes with. The many disadvantages include, but are not limited to, major difficulties in the acquisition of national documents, i.e., identification cards and passports that are hard to come by in any case. After historically positioning themselves as Asiatic and distancing themselves from other Kenyans, Weitzberg notes that in present-day Wajir, there are many

individuals who regret the actions of that period. However, it can be argued that this opinion is due to Somalia being engulfed in conflict. Conversely, the author states that the Ogaden are of a different view, having kin on either side of the border or thus more aware of the corruption and tribalism in Somalia. It is however arguable that the majority of the Ogaden that did not settle eventually went back to Somalia. This is true to a lesser extent because many of those that left during the conflict returned home and were pardoned by Kenyan authorities after being classified as returnees. This is still true as descendants of those that either took up arms or fled the conflict are trickling back decades later. Similarly, and to a certain extent, the feeling of being treated poorly and as outsiders still persists among all the peoples of the former NFD.

While Isaacs were fighting for their ancestral land in Naivasha, Kenya received an influx of Somali refugees. Their arrival was met with a mixed reaction, with some local Kenyan Somalis referring to them as brothers, while others were concerned that they would shift the existing structures the local Somalis had already established. Amina Kinsi, an Isaac leader, points to these new arrivals as the reason why they were displaced from Eastleigh, a suburb of Nairobi. Weitzberg claims that the main source of tension within the two groups of Somalis was the fear of losing political and economic space as well as being viewed as a foreigner. This was inevitable however, as the new reality of the Kenyan nation allowed for freedom to settle anywhere in the country. This was true at least in theory. The tribal and ethnic nature of the new Kenya also dictated that the new arrivals would naturally be attracted to settle closer to their kin.

Because ethnicity in African politics has always existed, the drive to have their own representatives in politics ensures that the ethnic community gets its due recognition. African countries use ethnic politics as a tool to suppress opposition from other tribes. Weitzberg conveys this point by using Siad Barre who, after losing the Ogaden war, began to suppress the uprising of the northern clans, according to Ingriis M Haji (2016, *The Suicidal State in Somalia*, 2016). This plan however backfired and instead primed the nation for a civil war in the coming years. To draw more parallels, the Daniel arap Moi regime in Kenya implemented policies that would strain any relations between the different tribes. As a result of this, Moi's election season was usually plagued by interethnic violence, with politicians stoking the flames.

In her introduction, Weitzberg noted that the majority of the participants only partook in her study so as to bring more attention to the discrimination they face in Kenya; thereby meaning the intended target for this book would be the international community that has an interest in the Kenya-Somalia relationship. For many years there has been an interest in activities in Somalia and how they affect Kenya from both governmental and non-governmental bodies. This is due to security concerns within the region. After the 1998 bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the US and other western countries decided to focus on the regions' security. With the rise of Al-Shabaab, Somalia became the key focus in all areas concerning security as well as health, migration etc.

In Kenya's 2002 elections, Moi stepped down thus raising a new sense of hope for Kenyan Somalis. However, this was not to be as the advent of the war on terror hit them even harder. The United States, fearing that there would be Al-Qaeda links in Somalia, began to root out Islamists through covert operations. Weitzberg notes in the book that the US may have overestimated the AL-Qaeda influence at the time, a claim that was derived from a former political adviser to the

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Unites States in Somalia, Ken Menkhaus (*Africa Today; Kenya the United States and Counterterrorism*, 2011).

During the Kibaki regime, the terror cell Al-Shabaab was gaining control of territories in southern Somalia while conducting terror attacks on Kenyan counties near the borders. In 2013 the terror group attacked Westgate Shopping mall in Nairobi that lead to Kenya sending troops into Somalia. Weitzberg claims that the international media did not focus on the political rise of Al-Shabaab but rather the outward Islamic appearance of the group. She states that due to this it makes it difficult to assess the changing culture within the region. This is an important factor because it fails to show how Muslims within the region choose to engage with the state.

To conclude therefore, it is evident from Weitzberg's endeavor that past colonial events play a part in why Somalis are viewed as outsiders in Kenya, while at the same impacting the community positively in many respects. The displacement of the Isaacs from British Somaliland, once Kenya gained independence, highlighted the importance of tribes claiming their "new" ancestral land in order to maintain economic and political relevance in the nation. The war on terror thwarted any hopes for Somalis to further assimilate in Kenya, due to being perceived as dangerous and treated with caution by the government. But this happened to a certain extent because the real situation is such that Somali are today the fifth largest tribe in Kenya by population while their economic and professional share and contribution have grown immensely. Their political representation now shows the diversity of the Somali clans living in Kenya, an aspect not lost on the other Kenyan tribes. The Somali in this sense have become masters of their own destiny.

The book is well researched and meets the intended purpose, which is to make "a contribution to Somali history," and helps us develop a better understanding of Somali society at large. Its simplicity is commendable and worth reading.

\*Bashir Haji is a PhD Candidate at Tangaza University College where he's writing his dissertation on Elections and Security to complete his specialty, which is Social Transformation: Security and Sustainable Peace. He is of Somali extraction and a native of the Northern Frontier District of Kenya (NFD), as it was then called under the British colonial administration. He was born and brought up in what is now Garissa County, where he undertook his early schooling, and from there joined the Kenyan military, where he served for almost thirty-seven years before retiring in April 2015 in the rank of Major General. While serving in the military he had much international exposure, having served in numerous capacities, including peace support and diplomatic assignments. He has shared his experiences widely, especially in international conferences and academic settings. Mr. Haji's future intention is to set up a security and sustainable peace institution in his homeland to help realise sustainable development and to heal the many insecurities prevailing there. He currently lives in Nairobi and is engaged in numerous academic and inter-religious dialogue assignments.